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Identification of Iran's factions may provide clues to its future

A senior official at the White House, who was involved in planning and carrying out the Iran initiative, says that there are three basic factions in Iran: conservative, middle-of-the-road or moderate, and radical.

"The conservative faction generally wants the war with Iraq to stop and would like to see a better relationship with the United States," he said. "And the middle-of-the-road faction is just that. The radical faction still wants to continue the revolution by exporting it. It still wants to remain involved with terrorism and is opposed to a relationship with the United States."

But a ranking government specialist says that even though the United States does not have nearly as much information as it would like, the situation is a lot more complicated than that. "You have a number of fluctuating groups, depending on the issues," he said. "Some domestic conservatives, for instance, are more moderate on foreign policy."

On the Iran-Iraq war, for instance, he said there is nothing like a peace party, but there are

those who feel there ought to be a negotiated solution, while others, most notably Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, whose vote is the only one that really counts, believe in time Iran will win the war.

"Those who feel victory is not feasible nonetheless support another offensive to see if Saddam Hussein's bargaining position can be weakened," the official said in a reference to the Iraqi president. "All factions appear to support another offensive."

Khomeini, he says, is a conservative on domestic issues, but a hawk on the war. His designated successor, Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, is regarded as a conservative domestically but reportedly feels the war eventually must be negotiated.

Hojatoleslam Hashemi Rafsanjani, the 52-year-old speaker of the Parliament, is regarded as a pragmatist rather than an ideologue.

He is thought to support a negotiated solution to the war but sees "no tactical utility in averting another offensive," the analyst said.

Rafsanjani is believed to have

been behind the recent arrest of Montazeri's son-in-law, Mehdi Hashemi, and several other members of Montazeri's inner circle.

Hashemi was active in coordinating relations with other governments and radical groups abroad.

Most officials believe the arrests represent part of the power struggle, but they have no idea whether Montazeri's relationship with Khomeini and his status as heir apparent has been impaired.

Another analyst suggested that Khomeini would not step into the fray either to support or undercut the man he picked to take his place after his death. "He doubtless wants to see how he handles the situation," this source said. "Montazeri will have to prove he can survive the infighting."

This analyst pointed out that the relationship between Khomeini and Montazeri, who is 64, goes back more than four decades.

Officials believe Khomeini, who is 86, has recently been ailing, but that major issues are still brought to him for resolution and that no one will do anything to challenge his judgment. For example, so long as Khomeini lives, US officials think the war will be pursued.

Most analysts believe that the Islamic revolution will survive the death of Khomeini and that, for a time at least, the mullahs will continue to rule. They do not think the armed forces or the leftist mujahedin opposition will wrest control from the mullahs.

- WILLIAM BEECHER

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